Design for humanity in the century of famine and warfare

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Abstract

Today only 20% of the world's total population live in more developed countries, while 80% in third world (McDavitt, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998) are trying to survive within inadequate conditions. Namely, only one-fifth of the world population has access to a designer-made environment, generally living in adequate conditions.

Responsive designers, NGOs and foundations are struggling to provide a better environment and life standards to those living in the Third World. Unfortunately they generally can't estimate that their attempt might legitimate the discrimination and inequality. In other words, there is a possibility that Design for Humanity may affect the poor in a negative way.

Keywords

Design for humanity, Third World, design responsibility, social design

Introduction

There are TWO worlds in the solar system: Northern World and Southern World. To my horror, one of the very few commonalities between is that they include carbon based compounds, such as people made of flesh and bone, flowers, animals, trees and microbes. They are so different from each other that they seem to be different planets: Northern World and Southern World or First World and Third World. We can widen this grouping further[26] like First World/Third World, Wealthy/Poor, White Collar/Blue Collar, Nuclear energy production/Nuclear energy waste disposal, Consumer/Producer, Production of waste/Waste disposal, Unreal World/Real World[27].

Today only 20% of the world's total population live in more developed countries, while 80% in third world (McDavitt, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998) are trying to survive within inadequate conditions. In addition, many of those, who live in the third world, have little or no access to most of the products and services (Design for the Other 90% Official Web Site). Namely, only one-fifth of the world population has access to a designer-made environment, generally living in adequate conditions. Also, Unreal World consumes 90% of the overall wealth of the world, while the Real World has to survive with the only 10%. It is claimed at Design for the Other 90% web site that, if all of us lived the American lifestyle, we would need nearly 6 earths[28].

Design Today: For whom does the 90% of the designers work?

"Problems cannot be solved by the same creative level with which created them"

Albert Einstein

"Design is conscious and intuitive effort to impose meaningful order… therefore all men (and women) are designers" says Victor Papanek (Papanek, 1971, p.3). Cooking is a good example to design according to this point of view; also preparing our desk for studying means taking a part in design activity, because design is an intuitive task. However there are some people named as "designer" whose profession is to impose meaningful order to others' lives. No matter they are architects, city planners or industrial designers; they design other's lives. The utmost important aim of the design activity should be making the world a more livable and desirable place for all. That's why human factor is of great importance in design field. Design is a very critical profession because it might be very hazardous to the mankind. "There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a few" (Papanek, 1971, p.215). Design, especially industrial design may influence our lives deeply, because it is a mass production and we inevitably use industrial design products. "Whereas architects and engineers routinely solve real problems, industrial designers are often hired to create new ones. Once they have succeeded in building new dissatisfactions into people's

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1   This grouping is open to argument at some points. For example, it is not logical to claim that the whole third world is poor and labourer or proletarian; and actually I don't mean this. However, I think there is enough evident if we think about manufacturing policies of world wide producers starting from 1980s. They decided to move their manufacturing units to the third world while their administrative and engineering units are still in the first world. As a result, they confidently print their labels on products: DESIGNED and ENGINEERED in EUROPE, (but manufactured in China).

2   I appreciate this term proposed by Victor Papanek, though he used it in a different manner. I suggest using it in an opinion that they are struggling with the Real Problems of the earth. They don't have much contribution to the problems which have been mostly arising since 1960s, although most of those factories which are known as some of the basic environmental pollutants locate in the 3rd World. Here, no one disagrees with Nigel Whiteley: "Third World countries on the other hand, resent both being told what is good for them, and having to pay (often quite literally) for the mistakes and high living of the West" (Whiteley, 1993, P.118). Those problems have been generally caused by the over consumption of resources and over emissions from point (factories) or non-point (air conditioners, exhausts, waste) sources. However 3rd World doesn't have much effect on that consumption; because they don't have enough economic power to serve the so-called Consumer Culture. On the other hand they are frequently blamed for being the cause of the environmental pollution.

3   After completing the survey at http://www.myfootprint.org/en/visitor_information the message delivered to me by the website was like this: "Dear Alkin, if everyone on the planet lived your lifestyle, we would need 1,4 earths. Reduce your footprint!", although I generally use mass transportation, don't travel a lot, and eat vegetable from national producers and very occasionally meat.

lives, they are then prepared to find a temporary solution" (Papanek, 1971, p.215). This indicates well the moral responsibility of designers to create products that are embedded in social responsibility.

There is an abundant number of examples which can convince us about the power of design and designer respectively. Tony Fry (1999) mentions about motor cars in the context of environmental impact and power of design. Let us think how much changed the city form, architecture, commercial activities, world climate, wildlife and waste generation after the wide production and consumption of motor cars by the means of mass production. Industrial design culture tries to confront issues by trying to find solutions. "The imperative of existing industrial design culture is to find new ways to generate wealth, new technologies, new products and new markets that deflect the problem in order to keep things the same" (Fry, 1999, p.91).

According to Buckminster Fuller design can solve the problems of the world as far as it deals with real issues instead of capitalist manufacturers' desires and love relationship with money. However, Nigel Whiteley believes that socially responsible product or social design approaches are noteworthy working areas in design field but due to great influence of the consumerist culture they can not reach their target. "If history is a reliable guide, socially useful production is always on its way but seldom arrives" (Whiteley, 1993, p.94).

90% of the designers work for the 20% of the world population; they work for the rich, living in relatively developed countries. Reason is very clear to Whiteley: "…first because it (social design) may harm their own financial prospects… Second, they find such notions anathema, politically and ideologically" (Whiteley, 1993, p.43). Victor Margolin speaks about Product Milieu, and proposes users to participate in the design activity by adopting or proposing new usage to products. "We can engage in its components with more awareness, either by supporting them or attempting to alter or eliminate them" (Buchanan and Margolin, 1995, p.123). Other 10% of designers take part in some missions voluntarily for the sake of poor and disadvantaged. They come up with the term Design for Humanity.

Design for Humanity

Humane design is a new term for designers with respect to old history of other fields of design. It (mostly) indicates a voluntary effort to produce solutions for the problems of the disadvantaged living in the so called Real World. Voluntary designers from all around the world, especially from developed countries, maintain that mission; they establish departments in universities, organize contests, build web sites and prepare advertisements and campaigns. This

appreciated work and effort helps the poor disadvantaged of the Third World. Unfortunately, there is an unnoticed point in this effort beside the goodness of helping people who need: Design for humanity might stand for the approval of "Third World's inadequate life standards" by changing into a casual design activity.

According to Design for Other 90% society, "of the world's total population of 6.5 billion, 5.8 billion people, or 90%, have little or no access to most of the products… in fact, nearly half do not have regular access to food, clean water, or shelter". However, this is not even a problem; it could be solved easily. The only thing to do is to invest a small percentage of the money which is spent for the army and war expenditures. The whole starvation, infrastructure and fresh water issues could possibly be solved in a short period of time. This assistance is the business of the administration of developed countries, but they don't approve such aids because of their capital based economies. Even the problem is basically created and sustained by the governments' and states' policies. As a result, responsive people, NGOs and foundations are trying to make a favour to those living in the Third World. Unfortunately they skip the problem that their attempt might possibly legitimate the discrimination and inequality; in a sense, means that the Third World can live on within those low standards.

Q Drum

"Q Drum" was designed by P. J. Hendrikse. The name comes from its shape; with the rope to handle, it looks like "Q" letter. It is used for water carriage in the rural areas of water shortage. The drum is longitudinal shaft that permits it to be pulled by using a rope which runs through the hole. Q drum is distributed by volunteers and NGOs to the people who need but cannot afford it. Its distributor claims that:

"The idea of Q-Drum originated in response to the needs of rural people for clean and potable water, as well as easing the burden of conveying it. The solution had to be simple, water in adequate quantities is by far too heavy to carry; by rolling the water in a cylindrical container had to be durable, and breakable handles and other attachments would simply not do in many parts of Africa even a hummer and

nail are scarce commodities. The Q-Drum addresses these needs by providing a simplistic, cost effective and durable solution".

As it is summarized above, Q-drum is produced, and distributed in rural areas of Third World where suffers from lack of water carriage system and even doesn't have access to fresh water sources. It is tended especially for use of women and children; its aim is to make their lives easier. Those who can get a Q-drum can be assumed being lucky; because there are many who can't. The child's bliss can be read from his smile in the photo of him and a Q-drum which was taken in Rural Africa. The dramatic impression of little trees, single storey cottage-like homes, and bright sandy terrain at the background, and the child with a Q-drum at the foreground causes a strange feeling in the observer. His smile and posture while pushing the drum (bended forward) are complementary to the background and strengthen the feeling of hot climate and the drought. Yet, the child's smile is hopeful on regardless, such that, an observer eye considers the hope and happiness of him in spite of all the shortage and poverty, immediately; because he is conveying water to his home, although only difference from a child who lives in (for example) Canada is his birth in 10.000 kilometers south-east. This picture, which reveals a feeling that fresh water problem is resolved in rural Africa, can cause an illusion in the sensation of the observer. No, actually his problem hasn't been solved. Here Design for Humanity works against humanity: It misleads the public opinion. In fact, that child has the equal rights to have a water pipe system that conveys fresh water to his home, just like his Canadian friend. As Papanek warns, this is a temporary solution that leads to another (and more destructive) problems.

Q-Drum has been acknowledged by the fact that world-wide patents have been granted for the concept, which means the legal acknowledgement of the product. It is also presented in many web pages, even it is sold through the internet. Those familiarize the public awareness with water problem of rural Africa, and cause a thought in people's minds that "problem has almost solved", but it is not solved that much.

Jaipur foot and below-knee prosthesis
The Jaipur prosthesis is introduced in Design for Other 90% website as a low-cost, durable and waterproof tool for people who need. And it is added that the prosthesis can be used with or without shoes. Designer of the prosthesis Sebastien Dubois claims that it has already helped over 900,000 amputees in landmine-affected countries. His ideas about design activity and developing countries are as follows:

"I spend most of my working time in the field of social design. In cooperation with organisations I design products for developing countries, trying to improve living conditions for different groups of people. There are hundreds of thousands of people on earth living with an amputation. A large proportion of them are victims of landmines. The performance of a prosthesis can seriously influence the quality of life of an amputee"

It is such an example that shows us how design products and artworks are successful indicators in illustrating the social - communal system and life standards of their time. They help us understand the human and value attained to her or him. As can be understood, it is the age of famine and warfare we are living in, unfortunately; and it is not more than a hundred years when the most sinful wars impaired the mankind. Humanity is getting more and more miserable and desperate, in addition insensitivity and neglect of people are ascending. Unfortunately, loosing a part of the body, wars and even dying from starvation have been becoming usual things of the life.

This advertisement is an example of how valuable human body in our world today, where 6,5 billion of population reside 80 % of whom live in unfavourable conditions. It is said in the advertisement-announcement that 900,000 people have lost their legs due to a landmine explosion. As a solution, the designer proposes his work: an artificial foot. Where is aesthetics, even more significantly, where is humanity? If we consider that thousands of people read this advertisement, then we may come to think that only that web site is a serious effect that implicitly influences people's mind that landmines and wars are ordinary facts of our century by familiarising the public to the landmines and indirectly to the war, the utmost wild and destructive shame of the mankind. The prosthesis beyond being a temporary solution to the problem, is a shameful example of design, even it is not a design product, in fact. On the other hand, prostheses have been used for decades and they really help people who needs. But it should not be observed as a design product; it is rather connected to surgery and medicine. If it is presented in a design web site, among design products, it creates an effect to cheapen the humanistic values in the observers' minds.

LifeStraw Water Purifier[29]

LifeStraw is a point-of-use water filter manufactured and distributed by Vestergaard Frandsen for the regions in the world which are poor in the fresh water sources.

> "Half of the world's poor suffer from waterborne disease, and nearly 6.000 people (mainly children) die each day by consuming unsafe drinking water.
> LifeStraw water purifiers have been developed as a practical way of preventing disease and saving lives, as well as achieving the Millennium Development Goal of reducing by one-half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe water by the year 2015"[30]

LifeStraw aims to purify water for the use. The aim is not increasing fresh water resources by building dams and maintaining pipe and agricultural watering systems. Creating new and efficient fresh water resources would be a real solution, which can be achieved by administrative foundations or wealthy countries, instead of designers.

Unfortunately water shortage is a fact; but again approach to the problem itself is problematic. They aim to solve the problem "without sustainable access to safe water" as is proposed at the advertisement. Advertisement itself becomes an evident that LifeStraw Water Purifier demolishes the humanistic values although it is a product of humane design. It is an appreciated attempt to work for the well-being of people, and inevitably it has to be done with minimum requirements within the scarcity in the Third World, but people who are involved in the humane design missions, should be aware that their appreciated work could possibly work against humanity at times.

Conclusion

This paper absolutely does not aim to devalue (appreciated) attempts of those whom are involved in design for humanity approach. Rather, it just aims to draw the attention

to the danger lying beneath humane design or design for humanity studies. Also it is a criticism to those who can not estimate the power of the design and its influence on the users' minds.

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